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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 OTTAWA 001491

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CONSERVATIVE DEFECTON DEALS HEAVY BLOW TO HARPER
ON EVE OF CONFIDENCE VOTE

Classified By: Classified by POLMINCOUNS Brian Flora, reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Before an audience of stunned journalists, PM Martin announced May 17 that Conservative MP Belinda Stronach has crossed the floor to join the Liberal Caucus and Cabinet as the Minister for Human Resources and Skills Development. She will also hold special responsibility for Democratic Renewal and will have a role in implementing any recommendations that come out of the Gomery Inquiry. Billionaire auto-parts heiress Stronach was International Trade Critic in the Official Opposition's Shadow Cabinet and key to Conservative efforts to appear more moderate and mainstream in liberal Ontario. Stronach indicated that her decision to cross the floor was extremely difficult, and stemmed from disagreements with Conservative Leader Harper on the timing of the no-confidence vote as well as the direction the Conservative Party is taking, in particular the Conservative's teaming with the Bloc Quebecois to bring the government down. Stronach's crossover, when added to that of confirmed independent Carolyn Parrish, puts the two sides even at 152 a piece; Thursday's no confidence vote will now be in the hands of the two remaining independents, Cadman and Kilgour, both of whom remain uncommitted. END
SUMMARY

BELINDA STRONACH CROSSES OVER

¶2. (SBU) The Ottawa press core was buzzing with rumors about the purpose of the surprise press conference -- anything from a cross border initiative to Darfur. But when the PM entered the room with billionaire auto-parts heiress and suburban Toronto MP Belinda Stronach in tow, jaws dropped en masse. The Prime Minister said that he had met with Ms. Stronach and "on critical questions of both policy and politics, we have much in common." The PM mentioned the high stakes they are facing in the coming week, and said that Ms. Stronach's moderate, centrist policies will fit well with the Liberal caucus, where she will serve as the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development. In addition she will be given a position to help implement the recommendations of the Gomery inquiry, and will head a committee on democratic renewal. Martin praised her accomplishments in business and politics, and repeatedly noted her courage for joining the Liberal Party when the likelihood of an election in the near future is very high. The media pool laughed en masse when Martin suggested that "the significance of her decision is not that it necessarily alters the outcome of Thursday's vote" and laughed again when he tried to clarify the comment. He persisted, and told the assembled journalists, accurately, that one vote is not enough to guarantee the government's success on Thursday.

¶3. (SBU) A somewhat somber Ms. Stronach then offered that her transition began at a function on May 12 where she discussed her ideological dilemma with personal friend David Peterson, Liberal Premier of Ontario from 1985-1990. (Note: Stronach has been out of step with her Conservative colleagues on same-sex marriage, passage of the budget, and the need for a party youth wing, among other issues. It was clear at the Conservative Party Convention that she was simply not comfortable with the party's western mainstream. End Note). Stronach says she suggested leaving politics altogether, but Peterson offered an alternative and arranged a weekend meeting between her and the Prime Minister through the PMO's Chief of Staff Tim Murphy. Stronach said that Canada requires viable party options and repeatedly noted that the Conservative Party is a new and growing party which will mature over time. But she clearly did not believe it is there yet, and emphasized several times that she was uncomfortable with the direction Conservative leader Harper is taking the party. She also accused Harper of not being "truly sensitive to the needs of the country," or understanding Canada's complexity and diversity. Stronach additionally stated her apprehension over the possibility of a Conservative government that is "beholden to the separatists."

¶4. (SBU) The announcement also had a soap opera twist, as Stronach tried to divert questions about her relationship with Deputy Conservative Party Leader, Peter MacKay, whom she has been dating. MacKay and Stronach have both been touted as possible successors to Stephen Harper should he falter. Stronach coolly deflected questions about discussions between

herself and MacKay as "personal."

HARPER FIGHTS BACK

15. (SBU) Stephen Harper delayed a trip to Quebec to hold a press conference of his own immediately following that of the PM. He said simply that the party felt "devastated" and "betrayed" by the move, which he only found out about minutes before the announcement. He countered Ms. Stronach's attacks on his leadership by saying that there were no "grand principles" at work, "just ambition." He also said he saw the move coming since it was becoming clear to Ms. Stronach that she would not be taking over the reins of the Party any time soon. Harper said he believes that when Ms. Stronach saw her leadership ambitions stymied, she simply jumped ship in an opportunistic move.

LIBERALS EVEN THE SCORE

16. (SBU) Stronach's defection now puts the two sides exactly even, 152-152 when counting independent Carolyn Parrish with the Liberals/NDP but not counting Speaker Milliken. The confidence motion on Thursday will thus be in the hands of the two remaining independents -- Chuck Cadman and David Kilgour, both of whom have stated that they would not decide until immediately before the vote whether to support the government or not. There was a further rattling of the Conservative numbers today when two Newfoundland Conservative MPs, Norman Doyle and Loyola Hearn, announced that they are under pressure from constituents to vote in favor of the budget. Both won their ridings by extremely low margins in the last election. Their dilemma stems from the tactical move by the Liberals not to break out the Atlantic Accord from the main budget legislation as the Conservatives wanted.

In the end it would be highly unusual for these individuals to defect on the budget vote, but the Conservatives took it seriously enough to address it in question period today. A Toronto radio station also cites unnamed Ottawa sources as saying two other "Eastern Canada" Conservatives could also be plotting defections to the Liberals.

17. (C) COMMENT: Though the Prime Minister is right when he says Stronach's vote does not guarantee the successful passage of the budget vote on May 19, nonetheless this is an impressive blow to the fortunes of the Conservative Party and especially its leader Stephen Harper. For the second time in two years (Progressive Conservative Scott Brison defected to the Liberals in December 2003), Prime Minister Martin has attracted a high-profile conservative MP whom he placed in a position of power in the government on the eve of a key vote. Clear divisions within the Conservative Party are highlighted by these defections and the divisions overshadow allegations of buying loyalty with a Cabinet seat. As a billionaire CEO and former party leadership candidate whose mainstream views were key to promoting the "new Conservatives," Stronach garners attention where a backbench Conservative clearly would not. In the process of her defection she places a huge spotlight on the problems many Canadians have with the Conservative Party and its leader Stephen Harper. In this instance, the spotlight will also shine on the Conservative proximity to the Bloc Quebecois and what that means for the future of Canada. Stronach's outpouring over her "very, very difficult decision" could easily resonate much further with voters than any Liberal election attack advertisement.

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